





# **Popular Religion and Ritual**

in prehistoric and ancient Greece  
and the eastern Mediterranean

edited by

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## A Minoan 'chytros'?

### Unexpected archaeological evidence for the possible pre-historic origin of an ancient Greek ceremonial practice

Lefteris Platon

The aim of the present chapter is to discuss the function of a peculiar clay vessel from Minoan Zakros, which has recently been completely restored (Petraikos 2013: 94). It deals with a vase similar in form to a common tripod cooking pot, but which bears on its exterior, on both sides, a number of successive horizontal rows of small cupules, densely disposed (Figure 1). This feature connects it directly with the category of 'kernoi', well known from several Minoan sites, e.g. ceremonial objects functioning as bearers of symbolic offerings and having close parallels among ancient Greek Eleusinian religious vessels (e.g. Mitsopoulou 2007: 472-477).

On the basis of the above, the Zakrian vessel combines a probably ceremonial object, the form of which is defined by a religious symbolism, with an ordinary domestic pot the shape of which shows its specific function: the boiling of water or food. On the other hand, the excavation context of the vessel reveals little about its meaning and/or function. According to the preliminary excavation report and diaries, it was found in fragments dispersed in two groups, in a relatively small room of a building lying to one side of the 'Harbour Road', which constituted the main approach to the settlement from the sea (Figure 2; Platon 1979: 308-310). From the same area come fragments of a wine jug, as well as pieces from the bodies and legs of cooking pots, fragments of buckets, basins and cups, and a vase with a hole in its bottom (Platon 1979: 309). The preliminary study of the pottery dates this assemblage to the end of the 'Zakros IV' chronological phase, equated roughly with the MMIIIB-LMIA period, which ends with a great, probably geological, destruction of the site (Gerondakou 2011: 259-261; Platon 1999: 677-680).

To explore the possible function of the object under discussion we must return to its morphology. Firstly, its size, 52.4 cm in height with a mouth width of 26.9 cm, suggests that its contents, if food, were for a relatively large group of people, certainly larger than a nuclear family. The comparison of the vessel to other similarly shaped cooking pots also found in Zakros is strongly indicative: it appears to be almost double the height of most, with almost similar proportions between height and width, so suggesting a capacity four times larger (Figure 3). Consequently, the main function of the vessel could not be purely symbolic, since it appears to



Figure 1. The tripod vessel from Zakros.

have been created for some especially increased needs in comparison to the ordinary vessels.

In the context of both Creto-Mycenaean and ancient Greek religions, the ceremonial use of kernoi has been marked out by several old and recent studies (Bakalakis 1991; Clinton 2009; Ellis Jones 1982; Karagianni 1984; Kourouniotis 1898; Mitsopoulou 2007; Mitsopoulou 2010: 53-54; Pollit 1979; Xanthoudides 1905-1906). It has long been considered (Xanthoudides 1905-1906: 19-20) that such objects, having as their basic feature the numerous, equal-sized, small cavities or, as in this case, cupules, were used for the 'panspermia', namely the simultaneous offering of symbolic portions of all the cultivated goods to the deities of fertility in order to protect and favour agricultural production. Nevertheless, it remains doubtful if these offerings were actually placed in every case in the small cavities or cupules of the kernoi, since the minimal capacity of several specimens, including the Zakrian vessel, would be a serious obstacle for such a use (Figure 4).

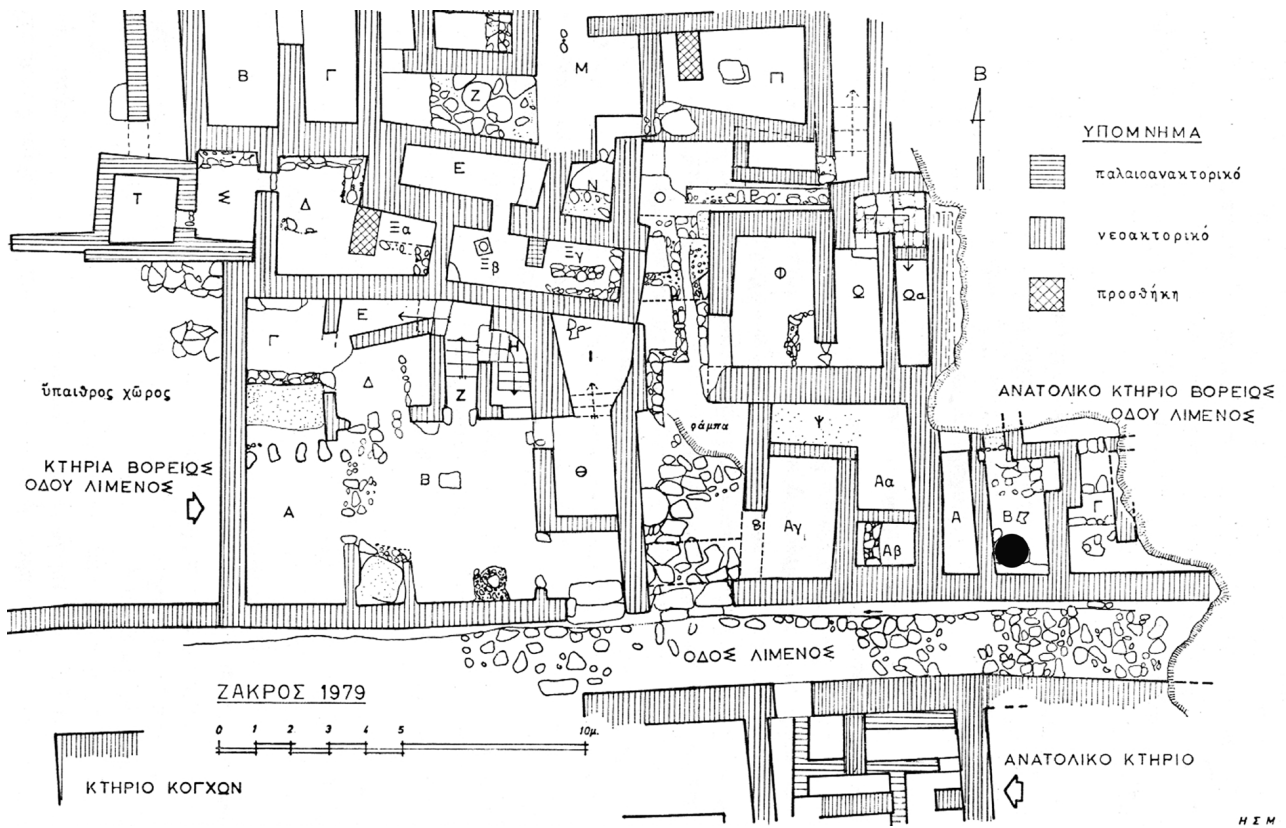


Figure 2. Plan of the Minoan settlement of Zakros, on which the precise find spot of the tripod vessel is marked.



Figure 3. Photo presenting a comparison of the vessel under discussion to other cooking pots found also in Zakros.

It has been suggested that the composite Attic Eleusinian vessel, which, with the addition of small cupules to the simple variant, comes closer to the form of the prehistoric kernoï (Ellis Jones 1982: 192; Mitsopoulou 2007: 472-477; Pollitt 1979: 209), was used for the processional transportation and consumption of the 'kykeon' (Delatte 1955; Mitsopoulou 2007: 533, 798-819), e.g. a mixture based on boiled wheat and

wine, usually with grated goat cheese or honey added (Kerényi 1991; Clinton 2009; Mitsopoulou 2010, 50 and n. 46 with further bibliography). This mixture was obviously placed inside the vessel and so the small cupules should be considered purely symbolic. So too in the case of the Zakrian vessel, it is reasonable to suggest that the foods to be offered were placed inside the receptacle, since this was to be heated for





Figure 4. Detail of the cupules of the Zakrian vessel.

their further processing. The shape of the vessel, with great depth and an inverted rim creating a slightly restricted opening, suggests the safe stirring of a fluid mixture (Figure 5, Rice 1987: 239-240). In other words, we have to do with the boiling of a mixture, which probably contained vegetable materials the great variety of which was declared to the participants in the ceremony by the many similar small cupules stuck on the exterior of the vessel.

We know that some of the Minoan cooking pots were probably used for the preparation of ceremonial meals to be consumed during religious banquets. Such vases have been identified in the Central Building of Kastelli Pediadha (Rethemiotakis 1992: 49, 56-60) and in the country-villa at Kephali Lazana Viannos (Platon 1960: 285-286), in both cases in direct connection with vases used for drinking and offering, but also with built structures to which the ceremony activities were directed. Moreover, at Kephali Lazana a sherd of a pot used for carrying solid food, probably a kind of basin or cooking pot, preserved part of an incised sign which is probably that of the double axe. One more double axe was also incised after firing on a domestic vessel, probably a cooking pot, found in House Δα at Zakros (Platon 2005: 123). Nevertheless, while in these cases use of the cooking pots for the preparation of meals to be consumed during religious banquets appears possible, there is no evidence that whatever was cooked in them had a special composition considered as a 'sacred food'.

Here, rather unexpected help comes from literary sources referring to ceremonial practices of classical Greece. From them, the earliest being a short reference of chronological class found in Aristophanes' *Acharneis* (Ach. 1076), we learn that the third of the three days of the *Anthesteria* festival was called '*Chytroi*'. *Anthesteria*, one of the four Athenian festivals in honour of Dionysus held annually for three days, the eleventh to thirteenth of the month of *Anthesterion* (the January/February full moon), was considered by the Athenians themselves as a very ancient festival (Burkert 1985: 237-242; Hamilton 1992: 5-62, 149-172; Hatzopoulos 2010: 286-294). This is supported by the fact that it was also celebrated in all the Ionian cities, so it must have preceded the Ionian migration of the late eleventh or early tenth century BC.

Overall, the festival was related to the fertility of earth and people and principally had a chthonic character. During the first day, named '*Pithoigia*', the ceremonial action was centred on the opening and consecration of the contents of the wine pithoi, in which the production of the previous autumn had been stored. The second day was called '*Choes*', taking its name from a specific type of pot, having a wide egg-shaped body, short neck and trefoil mouth. This small-sized vessel was used in drink-off matches, the winner being he who drained his cup most rapidly. The fertility dimension of the festival is suggested by a 'sacral marriage' ('*hierogamy*'), during the same, second, day, in which the wife ('*basilinna*') of the grand master ('*archon basileus*') participated. Finally, the third day, '*Chytroi*', with the word referring directly



Figure 5. The restricted opening of the vessel, shown from above.

to the use of cooking pots (*chytrai*) for the preparation of the sacral food, culminated in the offering of cooked pulses (*panspermia*) to *Hermes Chthonios*, or, according to other scholars, with its consumption by the participants of the festival. The proverbial ancient Greek phrase ‘θύραζε Κάρες, ουκέτ’ Ανθηστήρια’ (‘Out of doors, Kares! It is no longer *Anthesteria*’), which ended the festival according to the ancient sources, probably connects the *chytrai* ceremony with an attempt to expel the souls of the dead from the city, who had been there from the time of the opening of the wine casks (Burkert 1985: 240).

The connection of the cooked *panspermia* with the souls of the dead appears to be a diachronic practice. One could, for example, refer to the *kollyva* consumed during memorial masses of the Orthodox Church. It probably deals with a prehistoric custom, something which is also supported by the frequent finding of cooking pots in Minoan tombs. According to W. Burkert (1985: 240), this food is also related to the ‘myth of the

flood’. When the waters withdrew, the survivors put in cauldrons and cooked whatever they could find after the destruction and offered sacrifice for the dead to *Hermes Chthonios*, eating from the cooking pots, believing that in this way they would regain life.

Although Harrison (1903: 37-38), and recently other scholars (Hatzopoulos 2010: 293-294 and n. 1706), debated the origin of the name of the *chytrai* ceremony from the cooking pots, using as their basic argument the reference of the noun in the masculine gender, the ancient literary sources are clear. In the valuable work of Photios, *‘Lexeon Synagogi’*, which used as sources older, now lost, ancient Greek lexicons, under the entry *‘Thargelia’*, which refers to a festival dedicated to the twin gods Apollo and Artemis, the following is written (Phot. Lex. 79: 23-26): ‘ο των σπερμάτων μεστός χύτρος ιερού εψέματος. Ἦψουν δε εν αυτήι απαρχάς τω θεώι των πεφηνότων καρπών’ (*‘the chytros full of seeds of the sacred mash; for they used to boil in it to the god the first-fruits of the crops’*).

Based on all this, the Zakrian vessel could be called 'chytros', since its morphology suggests a use very similar to that reported for the 'chytroi' of the ancient Greek literature sources. Nevertheless, one could consider it risky to 'transport' religious beliefs and ceremonies of classical antiquity to Bronze Age Crete based exclusively on the discovery of a single vessel. Moreover, if the preparation of the cooked '*panspermia*' constituted an integral part of an annually repeated Minoan festival, then why have we not identified to date, in the numerous Cretan excavations, more vessels similar to the Zakros *chytros*? One answer is that common cooking pots may have been used, or, for more collective activities, bronze, usually tripod, cauldrons, a representative specimen of which comes from the Late Minoan cemetery at Archanes (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997: 593-594, fig. 614). The religious-ceremonial use of tripod cauldrons in Minoan Crete is supported by the miniature imitation of such a vessel placed on the top of a peculiar clay object also from Zakros (Platon 1967: 170; Platon 1990; Platon 2008), which shares several morphological features with the tube-like kernoi (Bignasca 2000; Mitsopoulou 2007: 367-376, pl. 1).

In the field of Aegean Bronze Age iconography, there are two possible examples showing the preparation of the sacred mash in the context of a religious ceremony or festival. The first – and least safe – is one of the scenes drawn on the well-known sarcophagus of Hagia Triada (Long 1974; Paribeni 1908). On the left of the scene representing the offerings to the dead, female figures, one of which is identified by some as a queen, are carrying and emptying the contents of buckets, carried on their shoulders by rods, into a big vessel similar to a crater or cooking pot. Most scholars interpret this representation as the offering of libations (Long 1974: 35-43; Nilsson 1950: 428). Nevertheless, the types of the represented vessels are not those normally used for liquid offerings, while the whole spirit of the scene suggests preparation for, rather than the climax of, a ceremonial action. So, it is possible that in the cooking pot-like vessel a mixture is being prepared either to be offered to the dead later or to be placed on the altar of the chthonian deity together with the other non-blood offerings, as in the scene represented on the other long side of sarcophagus. It should be added here that a similar vase appears on a seal from Naxos (CMS V.2: 483, nr. 608), depicted together with libation vessels above an offering table, probably also indicating the dedication of solid offerings to the deity.

The second – and even more important – iconographical evidence occurs on a wall-painting from the Late Cycladic settlement at Hagia Irini, Kea (Morgan 1998: 204, fig. 6; Morgan 2007: 119). Here, at a sea-shore site approached by a fleet of ships, some scenes from the preparation of a festival seem to be depicted, among

which is one of cooking inside big tripod cooking pots. Considering the topography of Minoan Zakros, with the sea at that time reaching the southern side of the 'Harbour Road' (Guttandin *et al.* 2011: 144-149, figs 246-249), such a scene could have very well been repeated there and the use of the *chytros* in a similar feasting activity would be an attractive possibility, though not absolutely proved. Another attractive hypothesis is that the *chytros* ceremony at Zakros is connected with a rise in water levels after the geological destruction at the end of the 'Zakros IV' chronological phase (Platon 1999: 679).

However, if the Athenian festival of 'Chytroi' really originates from similar religious practices known in Bronze Age Crete, then it is possible that more ceremonies included in *Anthesteria* also had their roots in prehistoric practices. For the opening of the wine casks in Zakros, some indications are offered by the finds of Building Z, a structure which was probably exclusively dedicated to the production and storage of wine (Platon 2002: 20). This building, apart from a complete wine-press installation (Kopaka and Platon 1993: 97-101; Platon 1988: 229-236, fig. 3), also had a spacious magazine with pithoi (Platon 1963: 165) and a large hall for social activities provided with an impressive pier-and-door partition ('*polythyron*'), unique for the buildings lying outside the palace limits (Platon 1987: 310-311). The consecration of the wine is confirmed by the presence of two offering tables, one in the form of a small column (Platon 1963: 165, pl. 142β; Platon 1974: 58, fig. 29; Platon and Pararas 1991: 17, pl. 6:26, figs 11-13), and by the decoration of a big pithos with double axes (Platon 1988: 232; Platon and Platon 1991: pl. 222a; Saliaka 2008). Finally, the possible organization of wine drink-off matches inside the limits of the palace itself is supported by the discovery of eight identical miniature jugs, together with eleven amphorae, in the so-called 'Banquet Hall' (Platon 1974: 157-160; Platon 2002: 20, fig. 22). The absence of finds indicating preparation or consumption of food weakens the hypothesis that real banquets took place here (Platon 1974: 158).

However, the Athenian *Chytroi* was a folk festival, in which even the slaves were allowed to participate. According to ancient literary sources, it was forbidden for the priests to taste the contents of the cooking pots, which were in any case connected with the food of the dead (Burkert 1985: 240, n. 25). So, the discovery of the Zakros *chytros* in a non-palatial and not exclusively religious context appears to be justified and expected. The vessel was probably in storage inside a specific house of this quarter of the town, to be used probably once only during the year in a folk festival of symbolic purification and invocation of the fertility of the earth.

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